Washington
Department of Wildlife
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Blue Mountain Elk Control Plan

Objectives

- Create a workable pilot project to establish effective elk damage control procedures
- Reduce the need for out-of-season harvest of elk
- Integrate wildlife management and wildlife damage control policies
- Test a variety of control techniques

Historical Overview

The Blue Mountains of southeast Washington are home to several herds of Rocky Mountain elk which total about 7,000 animals.

After near extirpation at the turn of the century due largely to unregulated hunting, elk were re-introduced to the Blues from 1909 through 1930 with transplants from Yellowstone National Park. By the 1960s, elk were thriving again. By the 1970s elk hunting peaked, and the Blue Mountains communities in Walla Walla, Columbia, Garfield, and Asotin counties were enjoying a near $3 million annual benefit from that recreation. Over the years, numerous factors caused a shift in the balance between elk herds and agriculture. These factors include growing elk herds, elk distribution, drought, severe winters, wildlife management practices and land management practices on public and private land.

Historically, elk have foraged on agricultural lands in the Blue Mountains. The department furnished over 21 miles of fence between 1943 and 1979 in an effort to alleviate damage caused by deer and elk. Most of this fence was placed to keep elk from invading agricultural lands. Much of the land adjoining fenced land is in the Umatilla National Forest, which comprises 14 percent of Asotin, 19 percent of Garfield and 28 percent of Columbia counties. Although fences have been constructed, it is not possible, nor desirable to "fence in" the national forest.

Washington Department of Wildlife (WDW) officials have tried to minimize this damage year after year with other methods of damage control, including: hazing elk out of areas with noise guns or helicopters, fencing haystacks, increasing hunting permits, and conducting special "hot spot" hunts—all with varying levels of short-term success.

By the 1980s, with more land in agricultural production than ever

before, and a slumping farm economy, landowners became less tolerant of elk damage. Elk damage claims have increased over the years, with an average between 1983 and 1987 of over $11,000 a year. And when WDW's efforts to control elk continued to fail as a long-term solution, an adversarial relationship between WDW and some landowners developed.

This plan is an integrated effort to use a combination of appropriate strategies to attain a long-term reduction of conflict between wildlife and agricultural resources in the Blue Mountains region of Washington. Its working components include: conflict prevention; landowner relations; habitat improvement; corrective measures and compensation.

Preventive Measures

Establish population base and harvest goals by Game Management Unit.
Population and harvest objectives will be developed by local wildlife management and enforcement personnel under the direction of the Regional Manager. These will be forwarded to the wildlife management division for approval and consultation with the wildlife enforcement division.

Population goals may be revised depending upon the results of the "Blue Mountain Elk Study" and subsequent findings.

A harvest objective will be developed each year. Herd distribution, last year's damage, and current damage potential will be considered when establishing harvest levels. In a GMU that has a history of significant elk damage, adjustments in hunting season harvest levels of antlerless animals will be recommended.

The area wildlife biologist, sergeant, and district wildlife agent will present and discuss population/harvest goals with affected landowners.

Landowner Cooperation

Landowners will allow/encourage hunting on their lands. Whenever practical, landowners will assist in preventing damage by allowing public hunting during scheduled hunting seasons.

Habitat Stimulation and Enhancement

Burning
Washington Department of Wildlife will pursue the use of controlled burning on public lands. This will require coordination with the U.S.F.S. and other agencies. The purpose of a controlled burn is to stimulate the growth of preferred browse plants on public lands which would attract animals away from private lands. It is estimated an effective program will require 2,000 - 3,000 acres.

Food Plots/Green Forage
Washington Department of Wildlife will initiate a program on establishing food plots on public lands, and private lands where feasible. Providing preferred alternatives to agricultural crops will lessen the amount of damage. Specific areas have not been identified. An effective program will require 3,000-5,000 acres.

A program patterned after Oregon's Green Forage Program will be implemented. This program will provide seed and/or fertilizer to landowners. The purpose is to provide excess growth of forage crops that are browsed by elk.

Mineral Enhancement
Washington Department of Wildlife will initiate a program to place mineral blocks on public and private lands, where permitted. The selection of locations will be dependent on the area's ability to keep elk from agricultural lands.

Ponds
Washington Department of Wildlife will work with the U.S.F.S. and private landowners to provide ponds. Areas selected for the construction of ponds will be chosen based on need and the ability to hold or attract elk.

To identify habitat manipulation needs, prioritize them, provide technical assistance, and generally assure the effectiveness of the program, it is proposed that a steering committee be used. The committee should consist of the following: A local landowner, a member of the Columbia County Agriculture Improvement Association, a sportsperson from the local area, a representative from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the WDW area wildlife biologist, and the local sergeant.

Corrective Measures

Response to Damage Complaints
Following the report of damage, Washington Department of Wildlife will contact the landowner and/or respond to the complaint within 48 hours.

Disbursing/Herding
During the months of March through August, two elk herders will be available to assist landowners.

The department will use a helicopter to attempt to move elk away from agricultural lands prior to calving.

Washington Department of Wildlife will continue to use and make available to landowners materials and devices e.g., propane guns, firecrackers, cracker shells, and shotgun shells for disbursing and redistributing.

Haystack Protection
Washington Department of Wildlife will furnish panels for the protection of haystacks that are being damaged by elk.

Elimination and Dispersement
When no other practical means of damage control is feasible, selected elk may be killed out of season. An assessment will be made by field personnel to determine the effectiveness of remedial methods. Consideration will be given to such factors as time of year, extent of damage, potential for future damage and whether

season adjustments are possible.

The numbers of elk eliminated will be the minimum necessary to help landowners disperse them from a crop that is being damaged. Most damage situations can be resolved with the harvest of five or less antlerless elk.

The preferred method of out of season elimination is to permit licensed hunters the opportunity to harvest the animals. The presence of hunters associated with the killing of a minimum number of animals has proven to be an effective means of dispersement. Hot spot damage control may be considered when the value of the potential claim exceeds $1,000. Authority for hot spot damage control will rest with the RegionalfManager. The Regional Captain will administer the program.

This method of hot spot damage control will utilize hunters who are selected by the Director. If hot spot damage control is not effective or cannot be used, the Director may issue landowner kill permits.

Compensation

Crop Substitution/Replacement
Landowners suffering crop damage may choose to receive hay as replacement for lost crops.

The advantages to the landowner are: almost immediate settlement, no requirement to file a formal damage claim, and quality (alfalfa) hay available at their convenience.

This method of compensation would apply in the following situation and manner:

Landowner and local Washington Department of Wildlife representative agree on dollar value of damage.

Cost of replacement (hay) will not exceed $2,000, based on average local price at time of agreement.
Both parties agree that the exchange, hay for damages, is full and final payment.

Formal Damage Claim

Claims of $500 or less
Where damage does not exceed $500 and the landowner and Washington Department of Wildlife representative agree on the amount of loss, settlement will be at the local level. Payment can be expected within 15 days following agreement.

Claims in excess of $500 and less than $2,000.
These claims will be processed and the claimant notified of the disposition within 60 days of receipt of the claim in Olympia. However, if a crop value cannot be established within 60 days, the claimant will be advised and the claim will be processed as soon as possible. Nothing will prohibit the claimant and the department from agreeing on a reasonable extension.

Claims denied by the Director, or payment amount refused by claimant.
These claims must go to the legislature for consideration.

Landowner Preference Permit

Purpose: To provide an alternative form of compensation to landowners incurring elk or deer damage.

Eligibility:
1) Landowner or tenant must own or lease a minimum of 500 acres of cultivated land.
2) The Department has determined that deer or elk damage on affected crop exceeds or is expected to exceed $500 per year. A permit will be considered for damage levels of less than $500, but not less than $250, if there has been a prior history of damage claims exceeding $250 in at least two prior years.

Conditions:
One antlerless permit will be issued free of charge per eligible person per year. Permit will be tranferable among the immediate family. Immediate family includes wife, sons or daughters. Permit to be used only on property where claim originated.

Permit will be considered compensation for a claim.

Cost 1989-91

Preventative Measures

Burning $15,000

Food Plots

$100 to $125/acre
200 acres 1989-91 biennium

$25,000

Green Forage

$50,000

Mineral Enhancement

10 ton/year @ $150/ton - 2 years

$3,000

Ponds

$700 to $1,000 each
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$6,000

*Cost for burning must be worked out with U.S.F.S. Cost for green forage will vary depending on the type of program, i.e. seeding, fertilization, or combination of two.

Acreage and type of program will be identified by task force.

Corrective Measures

Hazing/Herding

2 laborers - March through August
Wages only - 2 years

$32,000

Helicopter

20-25 hours @ $250/hour - 2 years

$12,500

Haystack Protection

150 panels @ $28.00 each

$4,200

100 post for hanging panels @ $4.00

$400

TOTAL **$148,100**

Cost (cont.)

Compensation

Hay - There are a number of alternatives for providing hay for in kind payment of claims. It is estimated that the need would be 160 tons/year.

1) Purchase hay @ $90.00 to $100.00 ton - 2 yrs.

$32,000

2) Use hay from north half of region one. Approximately 30 tons available. Transportation cost by Washington Department of Wildlife truck does not include labor for loading/unloading - 2 yrs.

$4,400

According to the regional wildlife biologist, this is not an accurate reflection of cost. Currently the hay is being utilized for payment to share-croppers and winter feed of deer in northeast Washington.

Should the hay be sent to the Blue Mountain area, Washington Department of Wildlife would incur added cost for producing the hay (current method of payment is hay for labor). This additional cost would offset any savings and because of transportation cost would be more expensive than local purchase.

3) The Wooten Wildlife Area is producing approximately 60 tons of alfalfa hay/year. This hay is currently being used for payment to sharecrop the wildlife area's fields. The hiring of one seasonal employee would eliminate the need for sharecropping. The cost for a temporary employee would be $3,000. This person could also be used part time as an elk herder.

The recommendation for providing hay is to hire a seasonal employee for the Wooten and purchase the remaining hay locally.

Cost - 2 yrs

120 ton/Wooten Wildlife Area

$6,000

200 ton/local

$20,000

TOTAL (Option 3) **$26,000**